

WE CLAIM AS OUR INVENTION:

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1. a2 > A method for processing postal matter comprising the steps of:
providing a receiving station and at said receiving station allowing a customer
to deposit a postal item and to enter shipping data for said postal item
into said receiving station and, at said receiving station, printing a
machine-readable marking on said postal item representing said shipping
data, to produce a marked postal item, and temporarily storing said
marked postal item at said receiving station;
transporting said marked postal item to a distributing station, remote from said
receiving station, and providing a franking apparatus, and a memory
accessible by said franking apparatus at said distributing station, and
transferring said shipping data from said marking into said memory at
said distributing station; and
franking said postal item with said franking apparatus at said distributing station
according to said shipping data transferred from said marking and stored
in said memory to produce a franked postal item.

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C1 > 2. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein said memory at said distributing
station is a first memory, and said method comprising:
at said receiving station, providing a first read/write unit and a normally closed
slot for inserting said postal item, and providing a normally closed
removal port for removing said marked postal item from said receiving
station;

said customer inserting a customer-possessed card, into said read/write unit;
enabling opening of said slot to allow said postal item to be deposited at said receiving station while said customer-possessed card is in said read/write unit;
generating a number at said read/write unit uniquely allocated to the postal item deposited by said customer;
printing said number on said postal item together with said marking at said receiving station;
providing a second memory at said receiving station and storing said number and said shipping data, as accounting data, in said second memory;
for removing said postal item from said receiving station, inserting a carrier card possessed by a first mail carrier, having a carrier card memory, into said first read/write unit at said receiving station and loading said accounting data from said second memory into said carrier card memory;
enabling opening of said removal port at said receiving station while said carrier card is inserted in said first read/write unit and removing said marked postal item from said receiving station;
wherein the step of transporting said marked postal item to said distributing station comprises transporting said marked postal item to said distributing station via said first mail carrier together with said carrier card;
providing a second read/write unit at said distributing station and inserting said carrier card into said second write/read unit and downloading said accounting data from said carrier card memory into said first memory;

providing a sensor and feeder stage upstream from said franking apparatus at said distributing station and entering said marked postal item into said sensor and feeder stage;

after franking said marked postal item with said franking apparatus at said distributing station, printing a list at said distributing station identifying said postal item as having been franked; and

said first mail carrier transporting said franked postal item from said distributing station, together with said list, to a mail distribution center remote from said distributing station; and

from said mail distribution station, delivering said franked postal item to a recipient identified by said shipping data via a second mail carrier.

3. A method as claimed in claim 2 wherein said customer-possessed card is a value card.

4. A method as claimed in claim 2 further comprising providing a sensor at said receiving station which detects deposit of said postal item at said receiving station through said slot, and providing a clock/date module at said receiving station, which, depending on a signal from said sensor, identifies a time and date at which said postal item was deposited at said receiving station; and

storing said time and date in said second memory at said receiving station allocated to said number and said shipping data.

5. A method as claimed in claim 2 wherein said customer-possessed card is a value card, and comprising the steps of:

at said receiving station, providing a plurality of sensors for respectively identifying a format of said postal item, a thickness of said postal item and a weight of said postal item, and providing a postal calculation unit at said receiving station;

supplying said postal calculation unit at said receiving station with signals from said plurality of sensors and, in said postal calculation unit, calculating a cost of shipping said item dependent on said shipping data, said format, said thickness and said weight; and

debiting said value card in said read/write unit by said cost.

6. A method as claimed in claim 2 wherein said customer-possessed card is a customer card containing an identification number uniquely allocated to a customer, and comprising the steps of:

reading said identification number from said customer card in said first read/write unit and storing said identification number in said second memory at said receiving station as part of said accounting data;

in said sensor and feeder stage at said distributing station, detecting a format, a thickness and a weight of said marked postal item;

providing a postal calculation unit at said distributing station and supplying said postal calculating unit with information identifying said format, thickness, weight and said accounting data and, in said postal calculating unit,

calculating a cost of shipping said marked postal item from said format, thickness, weight and shipping data; and
debiting a customer account, identified by said identification number, by said cost.

7. A method as claimed in claim 6 comprising the steps of:
providing a sensor at said receiving station which detects deposit of said postal item at said receiving station through said slot, and providing a clock/date module at said receiving station which, upon receipt of a signal from said sensor, identifies a time and date at which said postal item was deposited at said receiving station; and
printing a customer receipt at said receiving station identifying said number, said time and date and said shipping data and making said customer receipt available to said customer at said receiving station.

8. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein said memory at said distributing station is a first memory, and comprising the steps of:
at said receiving station, providing a first read/write unit, a normally closed slot for inserting said postal item into said receiving station, and a normally closed removal port for removing said marked postal item from said receiving station;
inserting a customer card into said first read/write unit at said receiving station, said customer card containing an identification number uniquely

said second carrier transporting said marked postal item from said receiving station to said distributing station together with said carrier card; providing a second read/write unit at said distributing station and inserting said carrier card into said second read/write unit and downloading said number, said identification number and said shipping data from said carrier card memory into said first memory; at said distributing station, scanning said machine-readable marking and identifying a weight of said marked postal item; providing a postal calculating unit at said distributing station and supplying said postal calculating unit with said weight and said shipping data and calculating a cost of shipping said marked postal item in said postal calculating unit; franking said marked postal item with said cost at said franking apparatus; debiting a customer account, allocated to said identification number, by said cost; and said first mail carrier transporting said franked postal item to a mail distribution center, remote from said distributing station, and delivering said franked postal item to a recipient identified by said shipping data via a second mail carrier.

9. A postal matter processing system comprising:
a receiving station having a storage container into which a customer deposits a
postal item and having a user interface operable by said customer to

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enter shipping data for said postal item into said receiving station, and having a printer which prints a machine-readable marking on said postal item representing said shipping data, to produce a marked postal item which is temporarily stored in said storage container; and a distributing station, disposed remote from said receiving station, to which said marked postal item is transported from said receiving station, said distributing station having a franking apparatus and a memory accessible by said franking apparatus, said shipping data being transferred from said marking into said memory at said distributing station and being franked in said franking apparatus dependent on said shipping data transferred from said marking and stored in said memory, to produce a franked postal item.

10. A postal matter processing system as claimed in claim 9 further comprising:

- a first read/write unit at said receiver station;
- a feeder at said receiver station having normally closed slot through which said postal item is deposited, said slot being opened upon insertion of a card by a customer into said first read/write unit;
- a control unit connected to said feeder which allocates a unique number to each postal item and which is connected to said user interface to receive said shipping data therefrom;

a non-volatile memory at said receiving station, accessible by said control unit in which said control unit stores said shipping data allocated to said number, and said control unit controlling said printer to print said marking and said number on said postal item;

a carrier card having a carrier card memory, possessed by a mail carrier, said mail carrier inserting said carrier card into said first read/write unit and said control unit writing at least said number and said shipping data into said carrier card memory;

said storage container having a normally closed removal port, with opening of said removal port being enabled by insertion of said carrier card into said first read/write unit to allow removal of said marked postal item from said storage container;

a second read/write unit at said distributing station into which said carrier card is inserted to download said shipping data and said number from said carrier card memory into said memory at said distributing station;

a sensor and feeder stage at said distributing station to which said marked postal item is supplied and which senses said postal item to produce sensed data; and

a postal calculating unit at said distributing station supplied with said shipping data and said scanned data and which calculates a cost of shipping said marked postal item from said scanned data and said shipping data and which supplies information representing said cost to said franking apparatus for printing said cost on said franked postal item.

11. A postal matter processing system as claimed in claim 9 wherein said feeder stage at said receiver station comprises a plurality of sensors for sensing a format, a thickness and a weight of said postal item to produce sensor data, said sensor data being supplied to said control unit; and

said card of said customer being a value card and said control unit calculating a cost for shipping said postal item from said sensor data and said shipping data and debiting said value card in said first read/write unit by said cost.

12. A postal matter processing system as claimed in claim 10 wherein said card possessed by said customer contains a customer identification number which is read by said first read/write unit and said customer identification number is supplied to said control unit, said control unit including a clock/date module which identifies a time and date at which said postal item was deposited at said receiving station, and said control unit controlling said printer at said receiving station to print a customer receipt including said time and date and said customer identification number, and a customer account allocated to said customer identification number being debited after printing said marking and before said franking at said distributing station.

13. A postal matter processing system as claimed in claim 9 comprising:
a first read/write unit at said receiving station, and a control unit connected to said first read/write unit;

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said storage container having a normally closed slot that is enabled to be opened upon insertion of a card by a customer into said first read/write unit, said card containing a customer identifier which uniquely identifies the customer;

said control unit assigning a unique number to each postal item deposited through said slot;

a non-volatile memory accessible by said control unit at said receiving station in which said shipping data, said number and said customer identifier are stored as accounting data;

a single printer at said receiving station, operated by said control unit, to print a customer receipt having said accounting data thereon and to print said marking including said accounting data;

said storage container having a normally closed removal port operated by said control unit to allow removal of said marked postal item from said storage container;

a carrier card having a carrier card memory, possessed by a mail carrier, which is insertable into said first read/write unit and which enables opening of said removal port by said control unit for removal of said marked postal item, said control unit loading said accounting data from said non-volatile memory into said carrier card memory;

a sensor and feeder stage at said distributing station to which said marked postal item is supplied after transport from said receiving station to said

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distributing station, said sensor and feeder stage including a scanner for scanning said machine-readable marking on said postal item; a second read/write unit at said distributing station into which said carrier card is inserted, said accounting data being downloaded from said carrier card memory into said memory at said distributing station; a control unit at said distributing unit connected to said second read/write unit and to said memory at said distributing station, said control unit calculating a cost for shipping said marked postal item from said accounting data and from said marking scanned by said sensor and feeder stage and controlling said franking apparatus to frank said postal item with said cost; and said control unit initiating a communication with a customer bank to debit a customer account at said customer bank identified by said customer identifier before enabling said franking apparatus to frank said postal item.

14. A postal matter processing system as claimed in claim 9 further comprising a solar powered energy source at said receiving station for powering at least said control unit.

15. A postal matter processing system as claimed in claim 9 wherein said franking apparatus comprises a rate memory containing postal rates for calculating a cost of shipping said marked postal item.

